

At meeting with EPA chief, residents united in opposition to Pebble

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One by one, representatives of a dozen Southwest Alaska communities stood to tell the head of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency of the threat they feel the massive Pebble mine prospect would pose to their way of life.

"If you take away who we are, our natural resources, that would be terminating us as a people," Mary Ann Johnson from the tribal council of Portage Creek told EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson Wednesday, during a listening session at Dillingham High School.

"The salmon have saved people from starvation," said Dennis Andrew, of the village of New Stuyahok, noting the importance of the Bristol Bay watershed's abundance to both people and wildlife. "It is so important that they continue to spawn in our waters."

The event, billed by EPA as a listening session on the massive copper, gold, silver and molybdenum deposit that could be mined at the headwaters of the Bristol Bay watershed, attracted only opponents.

Supporters, including representatives of Iliamna Development Corp., who say the prospect poses a tremendous opportunity for economic development, were not in attendance.

Jackson had met earlier in Anchorage with representatives of the Pebble Limited Partnership, which has said it will invest up to \$73 million in Alaska this year as part of its ongoing effort to advance the project. According to the Pebble Partnership, the mine prospect has one of the largest concentrations of copper, gold, molybdenum and silver in the world.

Those speaking to the EPA at the listening session spoke of other riches. They are the sons and daughters of Eskimo families who have inhabited this region for thousands of years, engaging in a subsistence lifestyle dependent upon the fish and sea mammals in the waters of Bristol Bay and a land bountiful in wildlife and berries.

"We lead a very rich lifestyle in a resource-rich area," said Tom Tilden, first chief of the Curyung Tribal Council in Dillingham. "We can continue to live in this area as long as the resources are protected."

"Bristol Bay is a national treasure that we must protect," said Robin Samuelsen, president and chief executive officer of Bristol Bay Economic Development Corp. "Bristol Bay is one of those rare areas where we should not mine."

"We believe," said Kimberly Williams, executive director of Nunamta Aulukestai, Caretakers of the Land, "that our life is just so worth protecting. We are not going to go away; we're going to keep fighting" (to protect the Bristol Bay watershed).

Jackson, who holds a master's in chemical engineering from Princeton University, opened the meeting with greetings from President Barack Obama. She told the group that Obama wants his administration to talk with tribes on a government-to-government basis.

She also told several dozen people gathered in the high school gymnasium "that there is no such thing as a choice between a job and clean water. You are entitled to both."

Jackson, who grew up in coastal Louisiana, said life there was tough "but I will take my hat off to the people who make their living here," a reference to the challenges of living in rural Alaska and the subsistence lifestyle.

The speakers' list ranged from Jason Metrokin, president and chief executive officer of the Bristol Bay Native Corp., to Bella Hammond of Lake Clark, widow of former Gov. Jay Hammond, who received a standing ovation.

Others included former Alaska Senate President Rick Halford, a technical advisor to Nunamta Aulukestai and Trout Unlimited; Dillingham city planner Jody Seitz, and Anchorage attorney Jeff Parker, representing the community of Nondalton.

Major concerns voiced were the importance of maintaining pollution-free waters critical to subsistence and the Yup'ik Eskimo culture, as well as the multi-million dollar commercial and sport fishing industry.

Some focused on potential activities at the proposed mine that they believe could forever contaminate the watershed critical to all life in the region. Others contended that activities during the prospect's exploration phase are damaging king salmon runs and causing many animals in the Mulchatna caribou herd to migrate elsewhere.

"Moose and caribou are an important part of our diet," said Peter Christopher of New Stuyahok. Exploration activities at the mine site have scared off 75 percent of the Mulchatna herd, he said.

"The mine could affect the Nushagak, which is our aquifer," Seitz said.

The city of Dillingham opposes Pebble, she said. "Fisheries are a critical piece of the economy."

Many speakers also addressed a need for a closer relationship between the federal and tribal governments, and said the state does not support the tribes.

The listening session was preceded by a potluck luncheon featuring a number of popular area foods, including moose, salmon, duck, muktuk



Dorothy Larson of the Curyung Tribe in Dillingham, at left, greets Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Lisa Jackson during a listening session on the proposed Pebble mine at Dillingham High School. Margaret Bauman/Alaska Newspapers (Margaret Bauman, Alaska Newspapers)

and fried bread, plus salads and large bowls of akutaq - Eskimo ice cream - filled with berries abundant in the region.

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